

Affirming the Differently Abled on the Indian Silver Screen: A study of *Black* and *Hichki*

Mouli Sarkar

Assistant Lecturer of English, Bengal Institute of Polytechnic (Affiliated to WBSCTVESD, Kolkata) Birbhum, West Bengal

Abstract: This paper attempts to focus on two contemporary Indian movies on the relation between the differently challenged persons, particularly women, and the social dynamics, *Black* (2005), and *Hichki* (2018). Seen against the tradition of Indian Cinema, in particular, and of popular culture in this subcontinent, in general, such productions crucially depart from the conventional cultural tradition by foregrounding the so-called disabled persons as fighters against the socio-cultural receptions of the subject body and codes of 'normalcy'. They are further set within the contemporary human rights movements. This study in social science of the relation between normalcy, power and culture in the above mentioned two movies is, therefore, framed within the theoretical discourse of Disability and Cultural Studies and look forward to a democratic society based on equality, freedom and justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Representation of the Differently-abled in Contemporary Indian Cinema

This article focuses on representations of the differently-abled woman in two 21st century productions of the Indian Cinema, *Black* (2005) and *Hichki* (2018). Seen against the tradition of the Indian Cinema, in particular, and of the sub-continental popular-culture, in general, a few movies of the first two decades of the 21st centuryⁱ make a crucial break by foregrounding the so-called 'disabled' women not as villains, or comic interludes or outcastes and victims, but as rebels, who radically question and alter the socio-cultural receptions of codes of 'normalcy' in relation to the close association between gender and corporeality. The interrelation between normalcy, power and culture in these works can be, therefore, framed within the objectives of Disability Studies (DS) that interrogates also the norms of Patriarchal state and social policies. That DS "from its political foundations and early theoretical formulations in the late 1960s and early 1970s ... has now become recognized [not only] as an academic discipline in its own right" (Roulstone *et al* 03), but also as a socio-cultural activism to shape other social vectors like class, creed and gender, is strongly established by the making of these movies by the mainstream production houses of the Indian film-industry, which celebrated its centenary in the year 2013ⁱⁱ. The present article thus analyzes cinematic responses to the "ableist thinking as structures of categorical exclusion" (Roulstone *et al* 04) underlying the patriarchal social divisionism in a specifically sub-continental backdrop. The focused films are investigated by applying the analytical tools of Disability Studies and mass cultural studies in the

context of postcolonial history, whose overlapping areas are discussed below, to be followed by the interpretations of individual movies.

II. AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Disability Studies, Pan-Indian Culture and Cinema

Raymond Williams in "Cinema and Socialism" insists that film, more than any other modern cultural form, has the potential to create virtually never-ending stream of significations by applying technological means: "the power, by cutting and editing film itself, to associate and combine different movements within an apparently single sequence made many new kinds of synthesis possible, offering new dimensions of represented actions" (112). However, mainly depending on the 'box-office' for its survival in a semi-feudal and semi-capitalist country like India, the film-industry has conventionally succumbed to social taboos and state imposed (dis)approvals regarding the individual bodies. In his introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader* Lennard J. Davis explains, "when we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (03). Thus, any theatrical production intended for popular consumption on a large scale – like film – has had a tendency to position figures of the superhero and the heroine as the object of hero's desire at an end of what Davis describes as "the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve" of normalcy (03), whose opposite end is occupied by the 'deviant'/'disabled'. Although with the gradual predominance of the physically and morally average in the field of culture, heroes and heroines are chosen from 'commoners', people with disabilities are separated for their allegedly 'undesirable' and 'uncommon' traits. The whole trajectory becomes particularly imperative in the manner gender and abledness as two attributes of corporeality work together to preserve woman body within the male paradigm of 'beauty' as a way to assimilate her to an assumed 'order of nature'.

Now, in a postcolonial context above representational strategies of popular-culture are directly related to the nation building process and democracy, and configurations of the prototypical bodies of male and female are seen as necessary to the national identity formation. Against this backdrop, Edward Said, in an interview entitled "In the Shadow of the West," advises the postcolonial critic to consider "what ... we [can] do outside of this system [of representation] that enables us to treat it as a productive, rather than a natural process..."

(44). In the light of this counter-observation, the new disability and feminist perspectives of film-productions enable us to unpack exclusionary policy of social categories; they also offer “a provocative but potentially progressive approach” to the workings of oppositional culture (Barker and Murray 63). With its primary association with Western mass protest movements like that of Black-Americans and women, Disability activism has recently gained currency in the politics and art of the erstwhile colonial countries, like India, and destabilized the patriarchal corporeal norms by reconstituting cultural contents and forms. The concerned films through the process of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating the social codes and conducts establish a novel relationship between the woman body and the postcolonial democracy.

The Tradition of Indian Disability Movies

The specific historical context always plays a key role in the dynamics of postcolonial culture. For instance, in his *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* renowned film critic Chidananda Das Gupta discloses the gap between Indian social structure with its uneven progress and the cinema as typically a technology based art form, affecting both the emergence of Indian Cinema and its popular reception: “It was held back by the very fact that it is a modern industrial-technological medium imported from the West imposed on [mainly] an agricultural ... society. Not being a traditional medium, there was no ready base for an understanding of it as a new language” (23). The twin forces of modern/post-modern technology and mostly conservative popular demand have thus worked on the Indian films from two opposite directions over its hundred years’ journey. For examples, impaired persons are represented in two blockbuster Hindi movies of 1970s and 1980s, *Sholay* (1975) and *Mr. India* (1987), mainly as either incompetent victims, or villainous criminals. These two films employ the conventional codes of pathos and dark humour. Whereas, an earlier production, an Uttam Kumar – Suchitra Sen starrer Bengali classic, *Shapmochon*, 1955, gives a more complex treatment to disability as its central theme. This journey of Indian cinema involves several twists and turns, and is led by an urge to address what Satyajit Ray calls, “the broad cultural pattern that is India, a thousand disparities in behavior, habits, rituals, dress, topography, language and so on” (90). The potential of film to deal with social issues of marginalization and exploitation, enables this cultural form to treat the complex category of physicality, and Indian cinema has taken a long time to find an appropriate language to question the socially coded abled/disabled binary and give expression to a more inclusive and democratic approach to body. The 21st century cinematic preoccupations with gender and disability, as exemplified by *Black* and *Hichki*, should be seen, therefore, as a radical turn in the tradition of Indian film industry.

“*Haan maine chukar dekha hai*”: *Black*, Visual Culture and Social In/Exclusion:

It was only in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, the release of Sanjoy Leela Bansali’s *Black* in 2005 that is forty-eight years after the Independence – a movie inspired by Hellen Keller’s life in *The Miracle Worker*ⁱⁱⁱ – created a massive impact on the pan-Indian audience, cutting across gender, class, regions and communities. The entire film is centered on the relationship of a teacher, named Debraj Sahai, and his student Michelle McNally, a girl who is both ‘deaf’ and ‘blind’. Perhaps the most iconic hero of the modern Indian film industry, Amitabh Bachchan, and another hugely popular heroine of a later generation, Rani Mukherjee, are shown to be in two lead roles of this production. The movie starts with Michelle – featured as a grown up lady – visiting her teacher Debraj, now admitted to a hospital as a patient of Alzheimer disease. It, therefore, uses flashback technique in order to trace their relationship back to the formative stage of Michelle. She as a young girl is shown to suffer a sudden shift from her ‘normal’ life to a differently constructed world for visually impaired girl as a result of some illness, which turns her into an uncontrollable nuisance for her parents, Paul and Catherine. At this stage of Michelle’s life enters her teacher elderly Mr. Sahai, portrayed as an alcoholic and eccentric man and a self-declared magician. The film’s positive endeavor to show a young woman stepping out of her double marginalization – as a woman and as differently abled – involves conscious intervention of an experienced man.

The movie dramatically relates issues of corporeality and multiple types of marginalization to one of the central concerns of the post-colonial democracy, that is, education. David Byrne focuses on the social policy of cultural and educational exclusion in *Social Exclusion* in the following terms,

When the term ‘cultural exclusion’ is employed in policy and related documents and discourses, it refers to the supposed cultural deficiencies of the excluded. It identifies those who are lacking in the cultural capital necessary both for gainful employment in the knowledge-based post-industrial economy and for the appropriately informed consumption of the high cultural products... (143)

In *Black*, the teacher, struggling to enable his student to realize her hidden potentials by arousing her differently functioning senses, hints at a new sort of personal understanding against the social policy of exclusion. In Ravi K. Chandran’s cinematography a private domain is created between the teacher and the student in response to the public world of norms. A series of scenes show how the teacher almost desperately uses every means to make Michelle familiar with the set of signifiers operating in the outside world. His method even frightens the girl’s parents, as when he throws water at the face of the little girl. And significantly he almost violently insists that prime signifier should be ‘light’ instead of darkness.

But the radical potential of the teacher-student relationship becomes evident only when it turns reciprocal, as in a scene of snowfall when the teacher tries to take shelter under an umbrella his student forces him to feel and understand nature in its wild vitality. The signifier 'black' getting rid of its negative connotations gradually comes to mean 'courage' and 'dream' in Michelle's life as she asserts in her 'graduation lecture', which gives her twelve years of struggle a fulfillment, in a seminal scene of the movie. It also signifies her successful entry into the institutional world of the 'informed' knowledge-system. In this connection the film effectively uses Michelle's stick as a means of connecting to the world. Significantly the entire story is told by Mitchell's narration. However, through the above entry, Michelle, on her part, alters the world of norms and makes it more inclusive, as implied by the sign language she uses to deliver her speech. One may wonder whether the audience, consisting mainly of the so-called 'normal' people, is not 'competent' enough to understand Michelle's speech as an interpreter is required for this very purpose. Michelle's journey comes to a full circle when she takes the responsibility of her diseased teacher: the student turns into the teacher of her former teacher. So education is made to serve its humanist purpose of the exposition of the self that is both independent and caring.

Visual culture as a way of life in the so-called civil society evolved most prominently with the introduction of printing press during the Enlightenment, and it conflated vision with all productive abilities. As a result the trust and reliance on the productive capacities of the visually affected persons have been gradually eroded in all forms 'modernity', and consequently this has influenced the reception of the sightless people by the larger society. People who are perceived as 'sightless' are conceived as incapable of effectively perceiving the reality of the world through the non-visual senses and correspondingly lacking the capacities to successfully pursue goals in life. The film *Black* which focuses on blindness in associations with forms of 'disabilities'/'abilities' on the silver screen is a powerful challenge to conventional codes of normalcy.

"*Madamji go easy*": Education and Social Honour in *Hichki*

The project of poststructuralist/ postmodernist understanding of disability in terms of the multiplicity of 'human morphology' (Shildrik 31, 34) requires to be complemented by a thorough examination of the role of socio-cultural (im)mobility and society itself as a disabling agency. Sidharth P. Malhotra directed *Hichki*, 2018, which is an filmic adaptation of Brad Cohen's autobiography *Front of the Class: How Tourette Syndrome made me the Teacher I never had*, too tells the story of the individual struggle of a girl, Naina Mathur, who, though denied of proper respect and opportunity during the period of her schooling for having Tourette syndrome, gradually overcomes all difficulties to establish herself as a successful teacher. The lead role is again played by Rani Mukherjee.

Naina, like thousands of girls in a country that takes pride in being the largest democracy and the knowledge hub of a liberal world, aspires to be a teacher only to turn into an object of humiliation both in form of mockery and unwanted sympathy for her 'hichki'. With an indomitable spirit she undergoes numerous interviews and rejections in spite of scoring brilliantly in school and college leaving examinations. Naina finally obtains a dream job of school teacher in an elite institution. Again, Naina's unflinching sense of commitment and extraordinary confidence help her to interact with a class of poor young rascals outside the purview of formalized education. They like to make fun of the seemingly peculiar and uncontrollable movement of her lower jaw, creating disturbing sound particularly while conversing.

As a postcolonial cultural text, *Hichki* throws light on the crossovers between class, education and corporeality: herself a victim of social marginalization, Naina begins to enquire into real causes behind the indiscipline exhibited by a special class of pupils. In a crucial turn of the drama she arrives at her students' houses to find how social negligence and abuses reign a section of her students' lives. It is from this point the protagonist of the movie transforms her so-called weakness into her strength, because discrimination becomes a common factor of suffering shared by the downtrodden girls and boys and Naina, their teacher. Naina's own experience of how the emotions of fear, pity and disgust contribute to the social distance between disabled and non-disabled people and how they construct the discrimination and exclusion enables her to understand emotive factors involved in other forms of social marginalization. Like *Black*, *Hichki*, too, prescribes a new methodology of teaching and learning, and enforces the larger social-body to be a more accommodative and just one, that would recognize multiple practices of acquiring knowledge. Naina's achievement in winning admiration of her trainees first and then also of the community in general offers a vision of a promising future, based on justice and liberty, in which education will cross the boundary of classrooms and support an individual to grow as liberal and sensitive human being. *Black* and *Hichki* both perform the role of cultural utopia in the more concrete sense of human action rather than a miracle. Tom Moylan in his *Demand the Impossible* considers utopia as "a forward-looking vision into the not yet", which needs to be materialized in constant struggle towards a better future (68)^{iv}.

III. CONCLUSION

Towards a New Language of Inclusive Society

The above productions of the pre-Pandemic phase of 21st century in different ways and at different degrees mark the intervention of popular culture into the social politics of corporeality which, in each of these movies, is closely examined in relation to human rights on health, employment and education. The issues addressed in these movies have acquired new relevance during the Corona virus pandemic, which has radically challenged the conventional bio-politics

by subverting the binary between ‘ability’ and ‘disability’ under a universally unprecedented threat to life. As the representation of the differently abled on contemporary Indian screen moves far beyond what some critics call ‘the pervasive nature of disabled images’ (Mitchell and Snyder 51) in conventional culture, the Indian cinema empowers us to reassess social relations on the basis of the individual’s affiliations and aspirations. Productions of mass culture in the recent years thus have become the most positively oriented self-aware agencies in “a process aiming toward and effecting transformation” (Moylan, Introduction xiv); and Indian disability movie in this process seems to develop into a specific genre of its own right.

This is again directly related to the human rights movement against all forms of marginalization and deprivation, to which recent disability rights movements has contributed centrally. When the unpredicted nature of the COVID pandemic reminds us every day of our physical vulnerability, and redevise the society into privileged and underprivileged sections in terms of one’s ‘indoor’ and/or ‘outdoor’ working positions, further democratization of culture and society is felt to be most urgently needed. In this context, the above films draw attention of the larger mass to the hidden ableist and gender biased approach in state policies and individual acts, and constructively participate in building a more inclusive and empowering society, based on principles of hope for equality. Such cinematic movements cannot be detached from the movements for rights of education and employment and that for social and economic justice in the democratic state. The affirmative note of the recent Indian Cinema in dealing with the multiple possibilities encoded in the human body and its frank denunciation of the normative social order helps a wide spectrum of receptors to decode the abled/disabled dyad and fight for a true democracy.

END NOTES

ⁱ For instance, Amir Khan directed and acted *Lagaan* (2001) and *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) focus on the differently abled with a strong positive note.

ⁱⁱ Considering *Raja Harishchandra* by Dadasaheb Phalke released on 3rd May 1913 as the first full length Indian feature film.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Miracle Worker* is a cycle of 20th-century dramatic works derived from Helen Keller’s autobiography *The Story of My Life*. Each of the various dramas describes the relationship between Helen, a deaf and blind and initially almost feral child, and Anne Sullivan, the teacher who introduced her to education, activism, and international stardom. Its first realization was a 1957 *Playhouse 90* broadcast written by William Gibson and starring Teresa Wright as Sullivan and Patricia McCormack as Keller

^{iv} Moylan’s thesis on the utopian role of the contemporary cultural texts is greatly depended on the notion of Socialist utopia put forward by the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch in his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*, 1938-1947.

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